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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest provides an overview of school-age child care (SACC) programs and suggests reasons for their growth. Discussion points out that escalating interest in SACC has paralleled the raising numbers of children left on their own, and that educators are only the latest in a parade of civic and professional groups which have gone on record as opposing the growing phenomenon of latchkey children and supporting the expansion of child care for school-age children. While research is suggestive rather than conclusive, educators recognize that the way children spend the hours out of school has always been an important aspect of their development. High quality SACC programs provide children with a comfortable environment and a great deal of freedom to move about and choose activities. These programs have a balanced schedule that includes child- and teacher-directed time, as well as opportunities for children to be in large or small groups or concentrate on something by themselves. Ingredients of successful SACC for older children include community service, a chance to earn money, and an understanding of the adolescent's heavy involvement in peer culture. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

PS-3-1988

Latchkey Children and School-Age Child Care

Michelle Seligson and Dale B. Fink

Concern about latchkey children has given rise to a wide array of child care programs. These programs are operated by public and private schools, child care agencies, YMCAs and YWCAs, and many other organizations. This digest offers an overview of these school-age child care (SACC) programs and the reasons for their growth.

Children at Home Alone

A Louis Harris poll of American public school teachers conducted in the fall of 1987 found that 51% ranked "children being left on their own after school" as a significant factor affecting children's performance in school. This factor was cited more often than drugs, poverty, divorce, or any other by the teachers sampled. Parents were surveyed at the same time, and 59% agreed that "we leave our children alone too much after school hours." Subsequently, the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP) queried its own members, and found that 37% of the sample believed that "children would perform better in school" if they weren't left unsupervised so long outside of school hours.

These surveys reflect an emerging consensus which has been in the making over the past decade. Educators are only the latest, and perhaps the most influential, in a parade of civic and professional groups which have gone on record as opposing the growing phenomenon of latchkey children, and supporting the expansion of child care for school-age children. Even the nation's largest employer, the U.S. Army, has decreed that no child under age 12 should be left without supervision after school, and has plans to bring SACC to every Army post.

Escalating interest in SACC has paralleled the rising numbers of children left on their own. It is difficult to determine the actual number of latchkey children in the U.S., in part because parents are reluctant to acknowledge that they leave their children without adult supervision. All agree that the number is in the millions. Many have challenged the estimate of 2.1 million, or 7% of children aged 5 to 13, which was offered by the Bureau of the Census in January of 1987. The parental response to a Harris survey indicated that 12% of elementary and 30% of middle school children were left in self-care. Local studies have yielded even higher estimates: for example, 33% of children were found to be left alone or with a school-age sibling in Michlenburg County, North Carolina.

Lost Opportunities for Children

The potentially negative effect on school performance of excessive time alone may be the main reason that this issue is catching the attention of teachers and principals. But other groups have enumerated many additional risks to children's health, safety, and emotional and social development.

The research is suggestive rather than conclusive. A 1975 Baltimore study and a 1980 study by a school principal in Raleigh, North Carolina, showed improved school performance by children in SACC as compared to peers who were not enrolled. But a 1985 study at the University of Texas at Dallas found no significant differences in school performance between third graders at home alone and those at home with an adult. A 1985 study at the University of North Carolina found latchkey experience did not affect the self-esteem of fourth and seventh graders. But a 1986 study at the University of Wisconsin found that the further 10- to 15-year-olds were removed from adult supervision, the more likely they were to respond to peer pressure to engage in undesirable behavior.

The loss of opportunities for traditional children's activities is another concern. Most latchkey children will manage to get through their self-care without being injured, sexually victimized, or suffering severe depression. They may even do some chores and finish their homework early. But what of their opportunities to relax with friends, get involved in nature activities, or ride a bike around the neighborhood? As Joan Bergstrom points out in the book, *School's Out,—Now What?*, the way children spend the hours out of school has always been an important aspect of their development (Bergstrom, 1985).

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SACC: Giving Children Opportunities They Need

School-age child care involves almost any program that serves children in kindergarten through early adolescence during hours when schools are closed. These programs are housed, funded, and administered by an impressive array of organizations. It is not uncommon for a program to be initiated by one organization, housed away from the organization, administered by a third party, and funded, at least in part, by yet another source. Organizations providing school-age care include:

- Elementary Schools: The NAESP survey showed that 22% of responding principals had some kind of before- or after-school care in their schools.
- YMCA: Approximately 50% of the 2200 YMCAs in the U.S. are involved in SACC.
- YWCA: About 29,000 children are served through its SACC programs.
- Boys Clubs of America: At least 18% of its 200 clubs now offer school-age child care on an enrollment basis.
- Camp Fire, Inc.: At least 17 of its 300 local councils now operate before- or after-school care programs, mostly in public schools.
- Association for Retarded Citizens: A number of ARCs around the country offer daily after-school care for mentally disabled children.
- Private Schools: The National Association of Independent Schools reports that a steadily rising number of its members are offering extended hours.

There are no national figures about the involvement of Catholic schools in SACC, but ADESTE, a SACC program which began at two parochial schools in West Los Angeles County in 1986, had begun in 67 schools within the Archdiocese by spring 1988.

Several local Easter Seals Societies run school-age child care and summer programs. Some are limited to the disabled.

Although there are no figures available, an increasing number of local recreation and park departments have switched from their traditional drop-in recreation to SACC.

What Children Do in SACC

Good SACC programs are neither an extension of the school day nor custodial programs which merely keep children out of harm's way. Rather, they provide children with a comfortable environment and a great deal of freedom to move about and choose activities. A good program has a balanced schedule that includes child- and teacher-directed time, as well as opportunities for children to be in large or small groups or concentrate on something by themselves. There are opportunities to try new games or skills, a place to read or do homework, and a varied curriculum. Many programs offer such activities as cooking, arts, storytelling, and sports.

A child who attends SACC is not necessarily denied access to other community activities. Good programs work collaboratively to see that children may attend scout meetings, sports practice, and other activities. Programs with children aged 10 or above have found that pre- and young adolescents need activities tailored for them. Community service, a chance to earn money, and understanding of the adolescent's heavy involvement in peer culture are some of the ingredients of successful SACC for this group.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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